

- * Linda Burnham
- * Third World Women's Alliance/Alliance Against Women's Oppression
- * 12 February 1998, by phone
- * Berkeley, CA

[K: Asked about what she does now.]

L: Well, what the Women of Color Resource Center does is---and actually I work here with someone who used to be in the Third World Women's Alliance, a woman named Miriam Louie---and we do a range of different things and I can send you in the mail some of our newsletters.

K: I have a copy of the directory that was published a while back.

L: We---there's a number of projects we work on. One is a curriculum development project that is developing curriculum for high school level based on the platform that came out of the 1995 Beijing conference on women---World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing. So we're developing a curriculum that deals with human rights issues that face women and girls for use in the high schools.

And then we also are working on an economic literacy project that deals with the way changes in the global economy impact women and girls and their communities. And that's being developed for use in grassroots organizations. Constituency-based, grassroots organization.

And we're also publishing a second edition of the directory that's taking us forever to get it out, but hopefully someday soon that'll be done.

We have a recently developed project on welfare that brings together African American women on welfare together with African American women writers. We're doing some writing workshops, that actually started just last week, so women can find a stronger voice and start to tell their life stories and deal with the impact of welfare reform. So, anyway, those are some of the things that we've been doing.

K: Excellent.

L: And yoga is another passion that I do in the cracks [I had asked earlier based on her answering machine. Discussion of yoga.]

K: Well, the first question I have is if you belonged to any other organizations before you joined the Third World Women's Alliance?

L: Yeah. Well, let's see. Immediately preceeding working with the Third World Women's Alliance I had, you know, belonged to kind of an ad hoc organization that came together here in the Bay Area---it's called "Black Women United" or "Black Sisters United"--- I don't even remember---that was kind of more on the consciousness-raising end of the spectrum. It developed when there were several of us who attended an abortion rights rally. I don't even remember the year, but it probably was in the very early '70s. Maybe even '69, '70, '71 sometime in there. And it was predominately white---the rally was---and a sister there asked that we---that the African American women meet under a tree of something. It was in Union Square in San Francisco. And we got---because we were a relatively isolated presence in that crowd---and we got together and eventually formed a quite informal organization called---I'm trying to remember if it was Black Women or Black Sisters United---I can't remember---that met probably over the

BWU/
BSU

course of maybe a year or two. And it was informal, talking about issues that impacted us as African American women. Maybe doing a little bit of study although I can't remember what [laughter]. And we may have taken on a project or two. previous activism

Anyway, I belonged to that, but I actually worked from my high school years, you know, I started as a political activist or with my political awareness when I was in high school, which I went to high school in Brooklyn, and started working there in a student---SCORE. It was called "SCORE."

K: SCORE?

L: Yeah, it was the Congress of Racial Equality and it was the student branch of it.

K: Okay.

L: And we worked around boycott issues. There was a boycott of a bakery in Brooklyn called "Ebbinger's" for their hiring practices. And there were school-board issues and all of that kind of stuff. That was probably the first political action, social action organization that I belonged to.

K: And, then, how did you come to participate in the Third World Women's Alliance?

L: I began participating in the Third World Women's Alliance---this is again in the early '70s and I had---let's see---I can't exactly remember the sequence of events, but I ended up going to Cuba with the Venceremos Brigade in 1972---'71 or '72---and met a lot of the folks who, you know, at that time were in their early 20s who worked with the Venceremos Brigade [look up relationship between West Coast/venceremos brigade activism leading to/coinciding with activism in other causes]. And one of the people who was doing that work was named Cheryl Perry and Cheryl had been in the Third World Women's Alliance in New York. Have you talked to her yet?

K: I have not been able to find her.

L: Do you have a phone number?

K: No, I don't.

L: Oh, well, I'll give it to you. So she---just remind me at the end of our conversation---anyway, Cheryl had been out here for a couple of years and had been working with the Venceremos Brigade and I guess had already started an Alliance chapter. There was an Alliance chapter functioning. She was working with both organizations---she'll have to give you the details on this---but, in any case, she recruited myself and Miriam and some other women who were working with the Venceremos Brigade into the Third World Women's Alliance.

K: So, do you recall how long you participated in the Alliance?

L: I participated in the Alliance from then until the Alliance---well, it went through a number of stages of development, but anyway, I stayed with the Third World Women's Alliance until---and, again, I don't remember what year, but at a certain point the Third World Women's Alliance changed into something that was called "The Alliance Against Women's Oppression." And that change came about as part of a complicated attempt to develop a more consistent class analysis in the

AAWO

organization. And that happened in the probably late '70s maybe? Sometime in the late '70s. So, I was in the Third World Women's Alliance all the way up to and through that transition.

K: Okay. And did you remain through the Alliance?

L: Yes.

K: And was Cheryl Perry also involved with that?

L: Yeah. Yes, she was. But, again, you'd have to talk to her about how long she hung in there because I don't remember.

K: So, do you recall how the organization was structured? The Third World Women's Alliance.

L: Well, I remember that it was a relatively loose [laughter]---it wasn't, like a lot of the organizations of the '60s and early '70s it was a pretty much all-volunteer operation. So, it wasn't like a non-profit of today where there's a staff and a board and a this, that, and the other. It was probably some distinction between the membership and a leadership collective. [break in interview]

Structure

So, we're talking about the structure. So, I think there was a leadership collective, which I don't remember what that was called. There may have been a chair. Maybe rotating, maybe more sustained. I don't remember. I'm telling you my memory's terrible. But I will say that it wasn't a real formalized, you know, it wasn't kind of like a Board/Staff structure or something like that. It wasn't particularly hierarchical, that's for sure. But there was some kind of on-going leadership collective.

K: So, you feel like perhaps there was a core that kept things going consistently?

L: Yeah. I was probably part of it most of the time [laughter] .

K: Okay. So, what events stand out for you from your time with Third World Women's Alliance?

L: What events stand out for me? There were---well, there were a number of things that we did and I think the things that stand out most---we did yearly, quite elaborate International Women's Day Events that were, you know, kind of strong community-based events that combined, you know, were a combination of speechifying, cultural stuff, feeding people, you know, the whole array. It usually took four or five hours to pull off. But they were---I think they were important events partly because they challenged us to really think about what had happened in the previous year vis-à-vis women's rights because each year we tried to give some kind of---some kind of a speech that talked about what had happened for women and to women, particularly women of color during the previous year. So, it was kind of an important opportunity to think about and sum up what had gone on politically for women.

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And, then, they were also really important events culturally because we made an effort to be pretty broad and diverse in terms of dealing with the cultural expressions of a bunch of different ethnic and racial groups. And we tried to figure out how to be pretty inclusive, so it was also important for us from the beginning to figure out how to include a children's event and how to make sure

that they were sort of framed as celebrations that were open to all. That men ✓ felt welcome at the events as well and families. So, I think those were pretty important.

K: So was it a street fair-type of thing?

L: Sometimes I guess there was a fair aspect of it, but usually there were indoor events. So, I think those were pretty important as events. We did also, along the way, we did like a health fair in one of the poorer parts of Oakland. We did organizing around infant mortality in Oakland, which has a fairly high infant mortality rate. So, that was an on-going campaign, which if you haven't talked to Vicki Alexander, it'd be a good idea to talk to her about that. I don't remember now if that was in the context of the Third World Women's Alliance or the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. She'd be able to tell you. She's also someone who was in both organizations. Does that answer your question?

K: Yeah. There was a follow-up question in there somewhere about the health fair. Oh, so for the infant mortality did you do things like have doctors present or healers to answer questions or put out pamphlets?

L: At the health fair we did. The infant mortality campaign was organized in relation to putting pressure on the City Council and the General Hospital here to develop measures to improve the infant mortality rate. *

K: Do you recall any ideological disputes within the organization?

L: Yeah, there were. I think the first ideological dispute, which happened a little bit before I came into the organization, had to do with lesbian women and I think this is also something that Cheryl would be in the best position to tell you about. There were lesbian women in the organization in the early stages out here in the Bay Area, but I think those women did not feel that the organization was particularly sensitive to their issues and concerns. Or, this is probably more---let me put it more strongly than that: I think they felt, and it probably was true, that the organization, which had no particular position on sexual orientation, was in fact fairly homophobic. And I think that there was a struggle within the organization in that early period---and now I'm talking about the late '60s, early '70s---as a result of which I think most of the lesbian women left [as opposed to the wording of "purging" in the white feminist movement, these women left; is there a difference? Is it related to the power that white feminists like Friedan had to actually "purge" women?]. That struggle came back around again several years later and this may have been in the transition from the Third World Women's Alliance to the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. And we had a more self-conscious and more extended struggle around the same issue as a result of which the organization came up with a more forthright [break in tape] supporting lesbian rights and supporting people's right to whatever sexual orientation they choose. *

lesbians
in org.

K: Okay, so there was more of a statement.

L: Yeah, yeah. And, as I say, I don't remember if the latter struggle took place in the context of the Alliance Against Women's Oppression or the Third World Women's Alliance, but those organizations sort of flowed into each other, so that's why my memory's not that clear from one to the next.

K: Any other ideological disputes you can recall?

L: Any other ideological disputes. Not that I recall, but that's not to say there weren't any.

K: Well, it was already a socialist organization, right, so there wasn't that tension of people who didn't adhere to socialism.

L: Yeah, it was already---I'd say as the Third World Women's Alliance it was--- yeah [a dubious "yeah"] it was socialist. I mean, it was---you know, I think the politics insofar as socialism was concerned were [pause] a little vague, but it was essentially sort of revolutionary-minded and supportive of socialism certainly. So, I don't know. *

K: How do you think the Third World Women's Alliance was viewed by other organizations?

L: I think within the sort of broad progressive community it was viewed positively. I think at that time it was one of very few organizations that really encouraged and developed the leadership of women of color. You know, there were a lot of organization, particularly working around women's issues, that were completely white and a lot of organizations that were completely male-dominated, so I think in that sense people recognized---hold on one second.

[break]

L: Okay, where were we?

K: You were talking about being respected in the progressive community as far as developing leadership.

[break]

L: Yeah, so I think in terms of the role of dealing with developing the leadership of women of color, which, you know, most of the organizations either could not figure out how to do or it wasn't a priority or women of color didn't feel comfortable in those settings or whatever combination of circumstances. So, I think the organization was respected for that.

K: Okay. Do you recall having an interaction with people of color communities and reactions from them?

L: Yeah, I think a lot of our---you know, we chose to have our events in people of color communities and people of color came. We organized our events in the Fruitvale---you don't know what the Fruitvale is.

K: I lived out there for a second.

L: Oh, okay. Well, the Fruitvale is a mainly Latino community out here, so we organized activities in the Fruitvale or when we organized events in the Fillmore, which at that time was a predominately African American community. So, we were pretty aware and careful about sustaining links to communities of color. I'll say that one tension and difficulty in the organization, which I think partly had to do with its transition and some of the problems of grounding, is that as an organization that dealt with trying build links and bridges across ethnic and racial lines, it then became difficult sometimes to choose issues that also similarly crossed ethnic and racial lines. So---which meant that to the question of "Are you grounded in one particular community?," the answer was *

probably usually, "No." So, that made for some complications in trying to figure out particular issues or campaigns to organize around. Do you know what I mean?

K: So, can you give me an example of an issue that you thought did that successfully? That was able to cross those boundaries?

L: I think it was partly an attempt around the infant mortality, which affected both African American and Latino communities to do that. I don't know what other particular campaign.

K: Or how about also an issue that you thought was difficult to try to have cross those boundaries.

L: Well, even something like a health fair. I mean, that health fair ended up being in a predominately African American community because communities are both geographically segregated oftentimes and people, in terms of how they naturally come together, oftentimes come together on the basis of their particular race or ethnicity and not necessarily as people of color. I mean, it's kind of a constructed category and I think it's an important construct, but it doesn't mean that it necessarily naturally translates into an organizing strategy [which also, then, holds true for TWWA].

K: Okay, right. So, then do recall any---oh, before that I wanted to ask if you recalled how the group was received by white feminist organizations?

L: You know, we---I think we were in sort of a long-term battle with white feminist organizations and I'm convinced that we always handled that in the best of ways. It was a period in which coming from a combative stance was pretty much "The Mode." And I think some white feminists understood where we were coming from and many did not. We were pretty insistent, and I think oftentimes correct, about the fact that most feminist organizations and/or feminist theory or political analysis didn't speak to us and didn't speak to the particular ways in which issues had manifested themselves in our communities---which meant that most of the time we were fairly critical of white feminist organizations.

defining
issues
separately

K: So, do you recall any coalition work that you might have done with any different groups?

L: I'm sure there was some, but I don't remember it.

K: Or any particular allies that you recall?

L: Yeah, I'm not the best person on this. I'm sure there was some. Do you have any documents from the Alliance.

K: I think I have one newsletter that I was able to find.

L: Oh my god, is that all?

K: Yeah, it hasn't been easy finding stuff on the Alliance.

L: Oh, geez.

K: And I believe I spoke with Francis Beal and she had the same newsletter that I have. Do you have any documents?

L: No, I don't, but---

K: I was told Cheryl Perry might.

L: She might. And I know that there was some stuff once in Vicki's basement, but I don't know if it still exists or not. You might ask her. I'll give you her phone number and you might ask her when you call her.

K: That would be really helpful. This is the one group that's been difficult to find documentation on.

L: There's a lot of documentation and I don't know how this fits into your research frame, but a lot of the basic political framework that was developed in the context of the Third World Women's Alliance was carried over into the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. And the Alliance Against Women's Oppression was more prolific in terms of kind of position papers and stuff like that. And I know that quite a bit of that stuff exists somewhere. I might even have some of that.

K: But you don't know if it's archived somewhere officially? (MSU)

L: No, I don't think any of it's archived anywhere.

K: It's good to have a name. So, were you aware of any other black women's organizations that were active around the same time period?

L: Not out here on the west coast. There were black women's organizations that kind of came and went, but I don't recall there being any that we interacted with here on the west coast.

K: Do you recall communicating with the east coast Third World Women's Alliance? Do you recall how that relationship worked?

L: I know that that happened at least in the early stages and I think Cheryl was kind of the main person through whom that communication took place. And I'm pretty sure that there was probably some complications, maybe some tensions, but certainly complications in terms of what the relationship was between the developing chapter out here and the Alliance back east. And I think at a certain point the Alliance back east was kind of folding and the one here was still fairly developed, if not growing. So, you know, I'm sure that was a little bit complicated.

K: So, overall, what do you think the Third World Women's Alliance accomplished?

L: Well, I think a couple of things. I think it really helped frame issues in that period in a way that wasn't being done by the feminist movement and was very insistent on making clear that women's rights issues and issues of women's liberation were issues that were important to women of color and that women of color were interested in articulating how those issues affected them and organizing around them. So that was not, certainly not a given and I think the Third World Women's Alliance, as an organization, really made it clear just by its existence that what were called "feminist issues" were issues of concern to women of color. So, I think that's one piece.

Then, I think the other side of that is that by the participation of women of color around those issues a new framework was brought and this is something I'm often asked to go and talk at schools about this, that and the other---about gender, race, etc. And one of the things that I try and emphasize is how some of

the concepts that are now current in the academy don't originate in the academy and really originated out of very complex, political struggles. And, first, the assertion of the importance of black women's issues coming out of SNCC, the assertion that women's issues were important to African American women. Then from that there was a transition when Puerto Rican women tried to---or asked to become a part of what was then the Black women's caucus. There was a struggle over the concept of "Third World" and how and whether it applied to the US. And how and whether women of color had something in common or had enough in common to participate around a common agenda in an organization. So, you know, the terms that's kind of taken for granted now, "women of color," didn't exist for us as political terminology at that time and was created out of a concrete circumstance, which is that women who were part of the Puerto Rican movement in this instance---this is not to say that it only developed in the context of the Alliance. It's just to say how it developed within that context. Puerto Rican women who had come to the organization, who were frustrated in their own organizations vis-à-vis their relations with men and how their issues did or did not get onto the agenda---so, that posed the question to these women of "What are the commonalities? Are there commonalities? Is there common cause to be made amongst women of color?" So that starts to become an important issue.

And, I think the whole---now, another thing that's kind of taken for granted is this concept of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender which was not taken for granted then. And in the Alliance that's reflected in a discussion and struggle and transition from a concept of "double jeopardy" to "triple jeopardy," which is the name of the newsletter. So, I think Fran's article is "Double Jeopardy," isn't it? And wherein the whole concept of the relationship between race and gender is developed and articulated. That, in the context of the Alliance, becomes a question and discussion around "Fine, but what does our status as working class women have to do with this," and out of that comes, at that time, a relatively primitive but important recognition that whatever analysis we've brought to the status of women of color had to include race, class, and gender. Now, race, class, and gender now is kind of like a triumvirate that's completely a part of the language and discourse in the academy, but it was not at that time and it's something that came, again, out of the particular political practice. None of these women were in women's studies [laughter]---came out of the particular political practice of women who were struggling to understand their situation and their circumstances. So, I think all of this is a long way of saying that another contribution of the Third World Women's Alliance, and certainly not only the Third World Women's Alliance, but I think the Third World Women's Alliance was a key player in this, was raising up that intersection.

advent
of race,
class,
gender

K: Okay. So, you were with the organization when it changed into the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. Did you leave that organization or---

L: Uh-uh. That organization kind of died a natural death. I don't remember the year. Yeah, it died. And I view the work that I do now as being in a line of descent from the Third World Women's Alliance.

decline
of org.

K: Do you recall when the change actually happened from the Third World Women's Alliance to the Alliance Against Women's Oppression?

L: No, I'm really the worst person in the world to ask for that date.

K: Okay. So, would you say that there's anything between the Alliance Against Women's Oppression and the Women of Color Resource Center? As far as the descent goes? Were there other organizations in there?

L: Oh, no. No.

K: So, why do you think the organization doesn't exist anymore? What was part of that natural death?

X L: Oh, I think a number of things. You know, the time really---the political climate really changed radically [Reagan?] and the ability to sustain an organization, to have it all kind of all on volunteer energy. You know, you do it in the cracks. There's no---nobody's even thought about funding much less-- you know, in sort of the---what's considered the grassroots and progressive community now, it's all funding-based and funding-driven. We came out of kind of a "let's make a revolution" context and funding, the world of philanthropy was about the furthest thing from our mind. So, we were going on and motivated by politics and youthful energy. So, we conducted our politics in the cracks: we had part-time jobs that we didn't care very much about and we, basically, made this our life. So, that is not sustainable over an extended period of time [laughter]. You can operate like that for a while with twenty year olds and people in their early thirties, but after a while that doesn't work anymore. And then the political tide that threw up organizations like the Third World Women's Alliance receded and had not come back around again. And the Third World Women's Alliance and Alliance Against Women's Oppression are only two of numerous organizations that did not survive, essentially survive the Reagan/Bush years.

decline:
Reagan/
Bush
no funding,
volunteer
burn-out,

K: Right, right. So, is there any thing else you'd like to add? Those are all the questions I have.

L: No, I don't think I have anything else to add. Let me go try and find you these phone numbers, though.

Vicki Alexander: 510.534.7402

Vicki is somebody who tends to be fairly meticulous about her record-keeping, so she's somebody who would know if she had stuff, what she had and where it was. Give me your address also and I'll see if there's anything about the Alliance.

Mentions relations with BWOA and know Margo Okazawa-Rey (Combahee).